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STATE NORMAL SCHOOL BULLETIN

SERIES II. NO. 3.

A STUDY IN CURRENT PEDAGOGY.

STATE NORMAL SCHOOL

OF COLORADO.

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STATE NORMAL SCHOOL BULLETIN.

SERIES II. No. 3.

Methods of Teaching Truth-Telling and Lying.

A STUDY

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PREFACE.

This paper was prepared to be read at the State Teachers' Association, but is presented as a bulletin of the school for the following reasons: Because of the interest with which it was received by people from different parts of the State; because it represents in its conclusion the general attitude of the professional work of this School as shown in the teaching of the philosophy of education, psychology and method, viz.: an attempt to treat the child intelligently and sympathetically, and finally, because it shows the nature of some of the work actually done in the classes of the School.

The topic of the study, "The attitude of children toward truth," was suggested by Superintendent Clark of Central City, the President of the Child Study section of the State Teachers' Association. The different classes then participated and aided in the development of the study. First, the class in elective pedagogy exchanged their own experiences, and discussed them in an informal and conversational manner. This preliminary study was made the basis for the following questions:

The Attitude of Children Toward Truth.

I. As a child did you ever have a special reputation for truthfulness? Age?

II. For telling falsehoods? Age?

III. Give reasons why you were especially careful about the truth, *e. g.,* because of previous commendation for truthfulness, shame, of some maxim, quotation or story, sympathetic attitude of elders, fear of later detection, fear of God or some supernatural form of punishment, etc.

IV. Give reasons why you told falsehoods, *e. g.,* fear of punishment, of displeasure of some one, through imitation of some one you admired, to attract attention, to shield another, through loyalty to a group, etc.

V. Were there periods when you were extremely careful to tell the truth followed by the opposite? Can you explain such?

VI. Were there any kinds of falsehoods which as a child you considered justified, *e. g.,* to strangers, if accompanied by some mental reservation, etc.?

VII. Give an incident which will illustrate your attitude as a child toward truth.

Then one recitation period with all members of the junior and senior seminars was given over to the dictation of these questions, followed by a general discussion to bring the whole problem clearly before the student. Before the next weekly seminar the answers were written out.

Every effort was made to secure the frankest statements. To this end as many volunteer experiences were given in the recitation as the time allowed, and all were assured that anything personal in their papers would be considered confiden-

tial and no names made public. The result was an unusually valuable collection of papers dealing with the early experiences of several hundred young people.

The results were checked still further by comparison with similar returns secured from the Normal High School, from Colorado College and elsewhere.

In working up the material in a limited time allowance it seemed best to omit many of the questions, and to confine the study to those answers illustrating the conditions under which most of these young people had been trained to habits of truthfulness or falsehood. Their experience is, probably, not very different from that of the average American child.

METHODS OF TEACHING TRUTH-TELLING AND LYING.

Like all virtues and vices, truth-telling and lying in the very young child are zero. In the course of normal development both appear later.

The child will, under ordinary circumstances, tell the truth to parent or teacher, provided neither it nor the parent nor the teacher has been spoiled. Whether the truth or a lie is told in a given case depends very largely upon the way in which the child fore-reads the probable attitude of the adult toward him.

A spoiled grown-up, a man or woman who has lost the grasp of childish motives and fails to sympathize with children's immaturity and weakness, will quickly and surely develop in any child the ability to lie and to do it skilfully. Many parents and teachers become as expert in forcing the child into this state as the child becomes adept in his part.

On the other hand, many parents and teachers are as steadily directing the development of the child to habits of truthfulness.

In this paper I shall endeavor to show some of the teachings which tend to develop these habits—to strengthen or weaken this side of one's moral character.

After a careful preliminary study of the subject with my elective class, a questionnaire was prepared, inquiring into the personal experience of each individual. The substance of these questions may be summed up thus:

Did you at any time have a special reputation for telling the truth or lying?

What were your reasons for doing each?

Give experiences illustrating your previous answers?

Tabulated, these returns would mean very little; quoted, to give the spirit. and studied, to show widespread tendencies, they are extremely valuable.

As a rule children are not notoriously conspicuous on either side of the truth line: though many children fortunately are very generally trusted by their friends, while an equal number, to their great detriment, are as frequently doubted. You all know plenty of children of both classes.

As an example of a truthful child, I give the following experience of a little girl:

"As a child I had no special reputation for telling the truth, but my impression now is that every one of those whom I knew just knew that I would tell the truth, which I did. I was careful about the truth because my parents just directed it, I don't know how. I don't remember being told anything about, 'Be sure you tell the truth.' I guess it didn't occur to me not to tell the truth."

Though there were a few other persons who were unable to recall any special reason which held them to the truth under trying conditions, the majority were able so to recall their early training that they could very definitely assign the general reason.

Most of their motives may be classed under the general heads of fear, responsibility, love, ideals furnished by previous teaching, and imitation of other persons. As nearly all of these reasons indicate teaching, direct or indirect, we will proceed to a study of the way the average citizens attempt to teach their children to be truthful.

Of all motives used that of fear in some form is the most universal. It may be simply the fear of "the bad man" at the age of 4 or 6, or at a later period a fear of some big, angry man up in the sky, called God, who delights to burn and punish little boys and girls who do not tell the truth. In some cases the fear is simply of displeasing or paining a kind mother or father.

You are all familiar with the method of teaching truth which the next experience illustrates:

"One reason I was so careful about telling the truth was because if my folks would suspect I was going to tell a lie about anything they would remind me of Washington and his father, and how Washington escaped punishment by telling the truth."

Here is the same method slightly changed: "My mother used to tell of a certain time in her childhood when she told a falsehood and was severely whipped. This story always seemed to work wonders on me, as I often used to think of it, and think what if I told a falsehood and got caught."

But the expected punishment is not always so concrete as a whipping. Another girl writes:

"I heard my mother talk about people who told lies and it always caused them trouble. This made an impression upon me that it never paid to tell falsehoods. I would always suffer for it somehow."

This somehow is shown most concretely and vividly in a few of the experiences in which some supernatural agency was expected to avenge the awful crime of the little child.

"I was taught," writes a modest little girl, "that God would know all about it and somehow I should suffer if I told anything but the truth."

More concrete yet is the following experience: "Between the age of seven and ten I was specially careful about telling the truth because of fear of God, whom I imagined was a great big man, almost like a giant, and of whom I was deathly afraid. I feared if I did not tell the truth, that God would shut me up in a dark place. Another reason was that I thought everyone knew when I was telling a falsehood because I had been told that every time I uttered a falsehood God wrote the word *liar* across my forehead so that people would know that I told falsehoods. I outgrew the above reasons for truth-telling when about eleven years old, and when necessary told falsehoods: primarily for fear of punishment, and very often to shield some one."

Another girl "had very real ideas of God's punishment. I believed implicitly," she writes, "that every time I told a lie a black spot would come on my heart. I could *actually feel it*. This often kept me to the truth."

Still another girl writes: "When I was about four or five years old I was told that God did not like little girls who did not tell the truth. And that He built a big fire in the west in the evening, and the children who told lies were likely to be burned in this big fire. So I was afraid to tell lies."

One more illustration of fear of supernatural punishment: "All through my life, I have had a horror of the end of the

world. This fear was intensified by frequent dreams which I had, and which made the mental picture which I had of the judgment day much stronger. Because of the terrible experiences which I underwent in these dreams, my fear of lying became greater, and although I lost some of that fear after my twelfth year, yet it has never entirely left me. At the age of twelve I developed the habit of falsifying through imitating a girl a little older than myself. She prided herself in telling most unheard of stories. * * I used to think it was great fun to tell great 'whoppers' for the benefit of my schoolmates. I was not real sure that this was justifiable, so I kept my hand on my neck, mentally repeating: 'In the neck—in the neck.' I usually corrected the false impressions later."

Somewhat akin to the teaching just described is the overemphasis of the enormity of the child's offense; some children being taught that "it is a crime to lie"; that "a lie is the vilest thing."

One little girl thought "lying was as bad as stealing. * * I never was praised for telling the truth," she writes, "but in the lie I told my mother and afterwards confessed, she talked to me until I felt as though I hardly ought to live."

A gentleman of my acquaintance was extremely truthful because he considered lying about as bad as murder.

A young man writes that "The fib which stands out most in my memory was in regard to a toy pistol. I traded for an 'agate' marble and told my father that it had been given me. When my father found out the falsehood he refused to speak to me for two days. Those two days were the most miserable of my existence."

Some children appear to find their strongest motive in the fear of hurting the feelings of father or mother. Some-

times the parents are over-anxious about the misdemeanors of a little child. Thus a little girl of six took fifty cents which belonged to another, and then said that she found it, and, until closely questioned, denied the facts. The mother in her anxiety over her child threw herself on the bed and wept. The lesson from this scene remained with the child as a restraining influence.

A formal method followed very widely to teach truthfulness is the use of stories and quotations. The following stories have been reported as having had a restraining influence upon different persons: *Washington and the Cherry Tree, Ananias and Sapphira, The Boy and the Wolf,* and various selections from different school readers.

Of the quotations given those that are positive in their teaching appear to be most valuable. Thus on the negative side we find only:

"Never tell a lie, my boy."

"Thou shalt not lie," and

"Be sure your sin will find you out," while the following are progressively positive in their teaching:

"Honesty is the best policy."

"Always speak the truth."

"Never tell a lie, my boy;
Always speak the truth.
If at work or if at play,
Always speak the truth."

"I would rather be right than President of the United States."

"Do right because it is right."

One girl says: "I was greatly influenced during the early part of my sixth year by a little verse in our first reader which ran thus:

"Speak the truth and speak it ever,
Cost it what it may,
He who hides the wrong he did,
Does the wrong thing still."

One girl reports that "at about ten a quotation given by the teacher made more impression than anything had before. It was given and explained thoroughly. * *

'For whatever men say in their blindness,
Despite the fancies of youth,
There is nothing so kingly as kindness,
And nothing so *royal* as truth.'"

The last citations have shown the helpful influence of the school; in the next two we have examples of unsympathetic teachers and of lost opportunities:

"A teacher I had," writes a Normal School girl, "always asked at the close of day how many had talked. I thought it my duty to tell the truth, but finding that very few did, I resolved to do the same. One day, therefore, when she asked, I vowed that I would not get up, but sit still as if I had not talked. When she asked, however, I could not sit still, but had to get up. I told her I had talked all day. This nevertheless, had no good effect upon her, for she kept me later than ever."

A similar experience belonged to another girl. "It was once asked at school who had been whispering as we were marching at 2:30 p. m. I had been the offender, and although

I could have remained quiet and the teacher would have been none the wiser, I told her, and as a consequence I had to stand up in front of the whole school. I had been struggling to get 100 in deportment, and knew that I could not get it then, and I was very much broken up about it. I was always very sensitive and bashful, and always shrunk from doing anything to attract attention."

Conscious imitation of others leading to habits of truthfulness seems comparatively rare, though there are a number of cases mentioned where the example of an upright father or older brother, or of truthful playmates, has been recognized as having a strong influence.

Of all the attempts to guide the child toward truthful habits the two following examples seem to me wisest and most sympathetic:

"I was always taught that it was cowardly to tell falsehoods. And my mother always told me that if I would come straight to her and tell her anything that I had done, she would not punish me for it. So I had no fear of punishment for telling the truth."

A second girl writes: "My parents were very sympathetic and often told me that if I had done wrong, they would be much happier if I told them about it than if I tried to hide it. In this way I grew to confide in them and never remember of telling a falsehood merely for fear of punishment."

The fact that parents have confidence in a child, and let him know it is extremely helpful. This is especially true of boys who respond most readily when placed upon their honor. Here are two incidents showing a helpful relation between mother and daughter:

1. "It seemed to me a very great wrong to lie, and I seldom did it consciously. My mother often mentioned this because there had not been so strong a tendency in the older children. This commendation and the fact that mamma and I were very near * * made truth-telling easier."

2. "As a child I had a reputation for truthfulness. I was truthful because my parents taught me that a falsehood was the worst wrong I could commit. Then, too, my mother always said she could trust me to tell the truth, and I felt in duty bound to keep my good reputation. Many times when I had done something that was wrong my mother would ask me if I had done it, and would say, 'Now, I am sure you will tell me the truth about this,' and I would feel that I must tell the truth even though I expected to be punished for my wrong."

In many instances there is a great difference in the influence of the two parents. In the following case the mother helps and the father hinders their daughter's development of truthful habits. "Fear of punishment from an overly severe father caused me often to tell falsehoods to him, when if questioned by my mother I should not have hesitated to tell the truth."

In the next case the father helps and the mother hinders:

"I was more liable to tell falsehoods to my mother than to my father. I never remember telling my father but one lie. This he spoke to me about in a grave, sympathetic way which impressed me very much more than the whipping or scrubbings of my mouth administered by my mother."

Of all the experiences I have gathered the next and last to be cited on the influences making toward truth shows

most strikingly the crime of misjudging a little child. The writer is a most worthy young woman, who is now struggling for an education. She says:

"Another thing that helped me was to try and keep the confidence people respected in me. People that I love did and still do have a great deal of influence upon me. When about nine years of age I was severely punished for telling a lie which I never told. After that I began to lose confidence in people, for I was placed out in the world, and seeing how many heartless, cold people never trusted or believed me, I would often lose my pride, and say, 'Oh, I don't care,' and would then give them something to distrust me for by acting or telling slight squibs. And yet if ever questioned my conscience has always ruled. * * I may add," she says, "that I do think that with a child, one gets as much confidence as one gives."

HOW DO CHILDREN LEARN TO LIE?

Dr. Hall in his famous paper on "Children's Lies," has pointed out that the motives differ, and in order to effect a cure you must treat the cause, not the lie itself. Hence treatment that would be good for one child might increase the evil in another case. Our last example under truth showed how unjust treatment might lead a truthful child into lying.

From the child's standpoint the motives for lying may be summed up under three heads—necessity, thoughtlessness or lack of control, and "fun" or imagination.

Under necessity the child would include those lies told for fear of punishment, of some one's displeasure, or of a

scolding; to avoid shame or mental pain as in the case of a very sensitive child; to please some one, or to shield another, the "lie heroic" of Dr. Hall; to avoid answering an impertinent question, especially if asked by a stranger, a tramp or a peddler; to gain something, as to avoid work, win a game or go a-fishing.

Under thoughtlessness are those impulsive misstatements or slight deviations from the truth often made by very young children, either because it slips out or, as they say, "because I didn't think," or because of lack of experience. In the latter case it is very likely to be due to a wrong impression the child has received.

Under "fun" the child puts the little stories he tells to produce an effect on another, as of astonishment, surprise, or excitement, or those told in his play when he is led by his fancy till he really believes his own tales.

First a few incidents showing how children are forced into lying from fear of punishment.

"I was always taught," says one young lady, "that a liar was the worst possible thing and under *ordinary* circumstances it did not occur to me to tell anything but the truth. However, I did not hesitate to tell a lie when I thought it *necessary* as I will explain later." Explanation: "At the age of seven my mother died and those who had charge of me for several years after that punished me very severely and often for trivial things. Consequently my fear of punishment was great, and I would tell a lie any time to avoid punishment."

Teachers who hold up the same standard of morals for the child and adult will do well to ponder the reason of the

little girl who writes: "Once when I was about ten years old I was asked about something which happened at school. What was the reason for doing a certain thing? I gave an untruthful answer because I thought that what had seemed reason enough to me, would not seem so to others. I felt justified in giving what I thought would appear to them to be a sufficient reason."

It is very common for brother and sister to lie to help each other. In the following incident the sister says: "I told falsehoods to keep from being punished for wrong-doing. I told lies to shield my brother; we were in the same room together, and we had the understanding between us that neither would tell on the other even if we had to lie to keep from doing so."

More unusual, though not infrequent, is the kind of conspiracy described in the following: "When I was nine years old a group of boys and girls were continually together, and we would tell anything rather than cause this group trouble. We would go and play after school, then tell that we had to stay in. If our mothers asked some other one in the group she would hear the same story. 'We had to stay in for not knowing our spelling lesson,' was our great excuse."

Some children lie because they are unusually sensitive about the opinions of others. One girl thinks she "fixed up stories more because she hated to hear mamma scold or tell papa or any one what she did or didn't do." The next incident brings out the adolescent traits of a boy:

"Another reason of some lies later in life was the fact that I was very much ashamed in what I had done, and shrank

from the ridicule, censure, or talk which would ensue from such knowledge. Comparatively recently," he writes, "I lied to shield another as well as myself from talk and fun at our expense."

One of our most capable as well as most conscientious senior teachers shows the same traits in the following account of her childish falsehood:

"My mother sent me to gather apples *under* the tree. There were none, so I picked some green ones *from* the tree, for I knew she wanted some very much. When I took them to her she said, 'You picked these, didn't you?' And I said 'No.' This incident haunted me for years. My reasons for saying no were desire for her approval and moral cowardice."

Here are two cases of lying for gain:

1. "When there was work to do, I was often sick till it was done. The 'dishes-ache', mamma called it, for when the dishes were done, I would play as hard as the rest of the children."

2. The second girl whom I quote on lying for gain also makes a fine distinction in the person to whom she was speaking:

"I remember that, as a child, I regarded truth as a necessity to elders," she writes (though sometimes she lied to these because of fear of punishment), but oftener I used falsehoods with my playmates. If I found that a game which we were playing was not going to turn out in my favor, I would institute a new rule in the game which had never been there before, but which was now advantageous to me."

The school offers many temptations, some in the form of associates with bad habits, some because of conditions which

thoughtless or blundering teachers or exacting and unsympathetic school officials force upon the child. Our witnesses are six young women:

1. "I think as a small child I never told a falsehood up to the time I started to school, when I was six years of age."

2. "The first lie I remember telling was when I was in school the first year. It was told through fright caused by a great threatening story told me by my seatmate. Later I told fibs of a certain kind because I thought it the 'fashionable' thing to do."

3. "Until I was eight years old I had the reputation of being truthful because I did not know what a lie was, for I had never been told what deception or falsehood was. The positive side of my nature had been developed, and the negative simply left alone. But when I went to school I soon found out what falsehood was."

4. "Then, too, in school affairs I was sometimes compelled to tell falsehoods in order to shield a group, or be branded by the disgraceful epithet, 'tattle-tale.'"

5. "To shield myself from a scolding for an unprepared lesson, by saying I was prepared."

6. "I remember one time saying I had practiced my music when I had not through fear of punishment. This story was told at the suggestion of a playmate who wished me to play with her after school."

Some children are very much like automatons in their statements. You make your suggestion, and you get your answer. Such cases need very careful treatment, or the child will be forced into the wrong attitude. Some mothers by blaming too severely such impulsive and unintentional misstatements alienate the child's natural confidence.

A girl speaks of such misstatements as follows: "I have told them at times, not for any reason; just be asked a question and answer 'no' or 'yes' when it was a lie, and not realize until later."

The thoughtless lie followed by regret is described by a college man thus: "About some things I was always very truthful, such as describing something or telling something I had time to think about, but on the spur of the moment I would always lie. Example: When at my uncle's when about 12, he asked me if I had been swimming. I said 'no' and stuck to it. Although sorry, I hated to own up."

How a sympathetic father treated his daughter in such a case our next shows. "When about 10 years old I frequently told wrongly things I had heard, because I had been wrongly impressed or had forgotten, or sometimes influenced by imagination. This occurred rather frequently, and instead of accusing me of telling a falsehood father would say: 'You have again the bell and knew not where it hung.' I feared others might think I was telling falsehoods so I became very careful to be exact in telling the truth."

Children sometimes, like you and I, say things for fun, when they do not expect to be fully believed. Like some of us, at least, they are led away to extravagant statements when speaking of things they have done, and describe in too glowing terms things which belong to "me" or to "my father."

This is the way one young lady speaks of her imaginative lies: "I remember as a child of five or six I used to tell stories that I made up; some were of animals that tried to hurt me coming home from school. And I used to like to exaggerate telling my little school mates of the wonderful things I had at home."

Another girl writes: "I would also tell falsehoods to excite people. I remember once of walking along the bank of a small lake, and saw a dead muskrat floating along on the surface of the water. I knew what it was, of course, but the idea occurred to me that it looked like the brown hair of a child. So I hastened and told my father and mother, who became excited and ran to the shore to see in the water only a dead muskrat."

Often this condition may have a provoking cause in the jealousy of a playmate. "I have always had a lively imagination," is reported by a young woman. "When I was 10 or 11 years old I had a little friend, about my own age, who was always telling about the wonderful things she had had or was going to have sometime. Of course I didn't want to be outdone, and it soon came to be a question as to who could tell the biggest story. In this way my imagination got to running away with me, and I would think of something until it really seemed that it had happened, and I would tell it in perfect sincerity, not dreaming that I was telling a falsehood."

In summing up, let me first remind you that all this experience has belonged to as moral a body of young men and women as the state of Colorado can show. Yet all of them acknowledge that at some time they have told falsehoods, many even were notorious liars when children. Now they are just as truthful as you and I. Either their early faults were not as abominable as we sometimes consider them, or somewhere between 10 and 20 a new influence has come in; things have been seen in truer relations, and life felt in a deeper sense.

I would not imply that untruthful habits are not a great menace, but that in individual cases we are often over-anxious. That there is great danger, if the right attitude toward truth is not taught, no one will deny. For this reason teachers have a peculiar responsibility, for children in their first year at school are often under the influence for the first time of misguided playmates; and all through their school life they are subjected to such conditions of discipline and promotion that it often seems to the child necessary to lie.

Finally, the attitude toward truthfulness differs very greatly with different children, but in the main is determined by older persons. On the whole parents and teachers are more to blame for most falsehoods than are the children who tell them.

Fear in some form is the strongest motive commonly used, both in maintaining the truth and in forcing a lie in critical cases. This is due to the nature of the teaching, as shown in the George Washington story, the religious teaching and in the over-emphasis, on the part of many parents, of the petty faults of children. Fear causes more lies than it prevents, and it restrains only as long as the fear of a particular punishment lasts. Its moral value in most cases is slight, and therefore appeals to fear are on the whole to be deprecated.

The natural position of the child is ignorance of the nature of truth as well as of the opposite; and if the attitude of the parent and teacher is what it should be, the child will have little or no occasion for anything but the truth.

Sympathetic treatment, which takes the child's standpoint, recognizes his weakness and his motives, and deals no

punishment more severe than these merit, is to be desired. To borrow again the thoughtful words of one of my students: "I think that with a child one gets as much confidence as one gives."

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Of the best articles on this subject:

[1] HALL, G. STANLEY. Children's Lies. Pedagogical Seminary, Vol. 1., pp. 211-218.

This classifies the falsehoods of children, according to the motives underlying, and suggests ways of dealing with different cases. In brief, it is to remove the cause instead of punishing for the lie directingly.

[2] CHENERY, SUSAN. Chapter II., in "As the Twig is Bent, a story for mothers and teachers."

The importance of a truthful example on the part of parent or teacher is emphasized. Here the mother is represented as taking the utmost pains to avoid the appearance even of doing anything which her young critic might consider a breach of faith.

[3] BARNES, EARLE. Children's Sense of Truth. Studies in Education, Vol II., pp. 308-313.

This study concludes that children are untruthful because of immaturity, the necessity of social adjustment, or because of the nature of their affection for another, and pedagogical suggestions based on these conclusions are made.

[4] SWIFT, EDGAR J. Education, Vol XVII., pp. 163-164.

Points out the futility of using fear to develop habits of truthfulness.

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